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ABSTRACT

Major objectives of this monograph are to explore the condition of American public education, offer an educational agenda for the 1980s, and suggest ways to restore public confidence in education. America's public education system is characterized as being currently stymied by the end of economic growth, unsure of what is expected of it, beset by declining enrollments, trying to solve problems on the basis of political balancing, and unable to deal with expectations that all students are entitled to equal benefits, regardless of ability, effort, or output. Various suggestions are offered to help educational policy makers deal with these and other problems. Major suggestions include that educators should concentrate on (1) developing and rewarding merit among teachers and students; (2) strengthening basic skills, including art and music as well as history, reading, writing, and arithmetic; (3) including more practical experience in teacher education programs; (4) developing a common intellectual ground among students by exposing them to great literary works; and (5) providing students with opportunities to study foreign languages and humanities. The conclusion is that educators will be successful in improving the educational system and in restoring public confidence in education if they concentrate on implementing these and similar reforms and if they take a cohesive look at what the sum total of 12 years of education ought to achieve. (DB)

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Educational Agenda for the 1980s

By Fred M. Hechinger

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The members of the Northern Illinois University Chapter sponsor this fastback as a memorial to the late Henry A. "Art" O'Connor, who had a distinguished career as a classroom teacher, a university professor, and as a Kappan. He served as chapter treasurer, area coordinator for Area 5D, district representative of District V, and as a member of the Board of Directors of Phi Delta Kappa International.

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The Condition of Education in the 1980s

What is ahead for education in the 1980s and beyond? To ask that question is to ask at the same time: What is in store for American society? What is the future of democracy? What will happen to the American Dream?

These are terrifying questions. They should be approached with humility, with full recognition of the peril of prediction. Futurists writing 40 years ago predicted that by now the power to light and heat our homes would be plentiful and cheap—less than one-tenth of a cent per kilowatt hour. Engineers foresaw tiny automobile engines the size of a man's fist driven by atomic power. The 1939 World's Fair allowed visitors a glimpse of tomorrow's cities—traffic hidden from view, parks enveloping beautiful and functional housing, the air unsullied, poverty banished.

Today, we live in those 1939 "cities of tomorrow." We watch today's television which, the futurists of yesteryear predicted, would make us a nation of sublime taste. It makes anyone, but particularly a reporter trained in dealing with what is rather than what may be, loath to predict. Perhaps the only safe alternative, then, is to examine the threshold on which education stands today and to chart some of the possibilities and challenges ahead. Maybe the way to begin, therefore, is to sketch the condition of the starting point—the condition of the schools as they reflect, in turn, the condition of the American people.

A story comes to mind about young parents and their little son. Five years had gone by without a single word uttered by the child. Otherwise strong and healthy, he simply would not speak. His concerned parents

had tried everything. They had taken him to the best pediatricians and the most renowned psychiatrists. He had been subjected to every variety of test and treatment. Nothing worked. The mystery, and the parents' gloom, deepened. Then, one morning at breakfast, the youngster, by now five years old, looked up casually from his cereal and said loud and clear: "Please, pass the sugar." For a moment, the parents were dumbfounded with surprise and joy. Finally, the mother asked: "Why, Billy, *why* haven't you said anything up to now?" The little boy replied matter-of-factly: "Sorry, mother. But up to now everything has been satisfactory."

The story describes, at least in part, the position of public education in the 1980s—and the position of the U.S. as well. There have, of course, been problems in the past; but in the main they seemed to be manageable, comparable to growing pains. In general, everything did seem, if not always entirely satisfactory for everybody, at least tolerable, with the promise of better things to come. No need to speak out too forcefully.

Today, the country and the schools face new and serious problems—some call them crises—which arise from deep and long-term changes within this society and in the world. Education finds itself in a serious identity crisis. Perhaps for the first time in its relatively brief history, it is unsure of what is expected of it. It is in a state of drift.

The End of Growth

Like all other aspects of American life, education is sharply affected by the end of growth. The American psyche has always been attuned to the concept of unending expansion, of more tomorrow than today, of children overshadowing their parents' success, of unlimited resources.

In the schools, the warning flag was raised in the early 1970s when, after three decades of annual record enrollments, suddenly one September morning, there were fewer first-graders waiting at the gates than there had been the year before. About 600,000 fewer, to be concrete. And in every succeeding year since, there has been a decline of similar magnitude.

In its most visible manifestation, the period of decline can be measured by the state of the schoolhouse itself. Less than two decades ago, a

reporter visiting any community would find at the top of the agenda the debate over where to build new schools and how to provide the additional classrooms to accommodate the influx of children, or to eliminate double or triple sessions. Today, the reporter would find exactly the opposite—a debate, often heated, over which schools to shut down, board up, or sell. Thousands of schools have already been closed; it is estimated that before the decade's end the total may reach 10,000.

The impact of a period of decline, after what appeared like unending growth, transcends the physical, financial, and bricks-and-mortar aspects. In a time of expansion, everything seems possible. When things go wrong, new approaches can be tried to make up for the failures; experiments are encouraged and readily supported; the prevailing mood is one of optimism. In a time of decline, every failure becomes traumatic because there is little support for trying new approaches to correct it. For every attempt at innovation, some existing activity must be cut. It is a time for surgery, and surgery is painful. The prevailing mood is one of pessimism, self-doubt, and conservatism. Progressive risks are too costly.

At the same time, the schools are asked to serve a post-industrial era that requires the storing and transmission of enormous amounts of information—more than at any previous time. Much of it is best described as computation without communication; it is a fragmentation of huge amounts of knowledge with a very limited capacity for synthesis. More and more specialists know more and more about very small parts of the whole. Awesome decisions, often affecting the future of millions, are made by people who must rely on secondhand information from experts who ultimately will not be held responsible for the outcome. As a result, decisions that call for a great deal of technological, scientific, or sociological/psychological knowledge are made by inadequately prepared managers or leaders on the basis of political balancing rather than synthesized knowledge.

Perhaps it is too much to expect the schools to react to such problems within the setting of mass education; but even if the expectations are scaled down to what may reasonably be asked, the present response is inadequate. There are, to be sure, more and more commencements, but they lack a sense of either completion or direction. The extent of

functional illiteracy, estimated at 13% of all high school graduates (in addition to the dropouts) is serious enough in a society that has few jobs and little use for illiterates; but beyond literacy, there is a crisis in attitudes toward performance on the job, responsibility toward the community, goals of management, and the mission of leadership. The range extends from the dawdling checker at the supermarket to the unquestioning, dozing member on the corporate board. Cost-overrunners are more popular, and successful, than whistleblowers.

The civil rights movement has done much to remind Americans of their clearly stated, but readily forgotten, goal to build a society based on equality of opportunity. But in recent years the reawakening to that fundamental principle has been subverted by a widespread feeling that equality is best served by an attitude of "me first"; or at least that every man, woman, or child is entitled to equal benefits or spoils, regardless of merit based on ability, effort, and output. While much lip service is given to communication, the preoccupation more often is with the "self," a trend perhaps underscored by the recent launching of popular magazines under the logos of "Self" and "Us."

No Longer a "Can Do" Society

We have moved from being, in the eyes of the world, a "can do" society to what appears for the moment to have become a "can't do" society. Veterans of World War II in England recall the awe and admiration with which the British forces and the civilian population used to watch the Americans move in and get the job done in record time. Within days after this country's entry into the war, President Roosevelt had gone on the air to pledge the construction, in the course of the year, of 60,000 planes. An impossible pledge that was nevertheless carried out.

When the fate of the free world depended on America's ability to harness nuclear power, the task was done through the full mobilization of the universities' scientific brain power.

When 12 million veterans, in 1945, shed their uniforms with the prospect of joining the unemployment lines, Congress responded with the G. I. Bill of Rights; and overnight the campuses responded, revolutionizing the tradition of college-going. As students were absorbed in hastily erected Quonset huts and tent cities, a new chapter in the annals

of higher education began. It was a course that seemed to follow naturally in the direction charted in 1862 with the creation of the land-grant colleges as the driving force of the agricultural and mechanical revolution. More recently, the "can do" society responded to President Kennedy's timetable to put a man on the moon. The apparently impossible assignment was carried out on schedule.

Somehow, the scene looks different today. The Japanese, long the butt of American jokes for their reputation for producing inferior copies of American products, today threaten to corner American markets with products of superior workmanship. The aircraft industry of the country that literally gave wings to the world is challenged by foreign competition. The latest models of a new generation of nuclear submarines have been described by Pentagon authorities as "a mess." The roofs on several sports arenas have caved in. The concrete of the recently rebuilt Yankee Stadium is showing cracks, as are the understructures of the latest models of subway cars and buses. At least from the American vantage point, contrary to T. S. Eliot's prediction, the world may end neither with a bang nor a whimper but with a crack.

None of this sounds as if much is left of the "can do" society, of the American exuberance of yesterday that coined the slogan, "The difficult we do at once; the impossible takes a little longer." In virtually every area, productivity has been declining, as have innovation and initiative. Despite its long and ample warning about the coming of the oil crisis, American automobile manufacturers left the retooling of the automobile to its European and Japanese competition.

Recently, an American reporter in Japan asked the managing director of a major electronics corporation what he thought was the difference between quality control in his country and in the U.S. The Japanese industrialist replied politely that in the U.S. quality is controlled by detection; in Japan, by prevention. This is a diplomatic way of saying that the Japanese approach is to make things work the first time, not after a costly and frustrating recall. In education terms, the same principle applies: prevention means early diagnosis of what needs to be guarded against: detection means costly and frustrating remediation.

Sometimes, the question is asked, "Why is it that teachers don't

care?" Without arguing the point, I usually ask back, "Who does?"

The Quest for Competency

There is much talk about testing competency, including the competence of teachers. Of course, there is need for greater competence everywhere, including the classroom. But why single out teachers? Who tests the competence of judges, cab drivers, lawyers, doctors, or corporate chief executives once they are licensed or in their jobs? A recent study by a business-oriented publication showed that there is no relationship between the salaries of corporate presidents and the success of the companies over which they preside. Indeed, the chief executive officers' pay was found frequently to rise even when their companies' earnings declined. At least, teachers are not rewarded when their pupils fail.

And yet, a strong case can be made for the reward of merit—an idea that enrages unions, including teachers' unions. When pay is not related to performance, or tips to the quality of the services rendered, incentive to do good work goes into decline; and an increasingly smaller number of conscientious persons carry an ever greater burden trying to keep enterprises—including schools—functioning. An economist recently suggested that the only way to reduce inflation would be by cutting all salaries, across the board, by four percent. Would such a step really increase productivity and, in the process, fight inflation? Would it not be more sensible to reduce salaries and tips in direct proportion to services *not* rendered, accompanied by the promise to increase the remuneration again in direct proportion to improved results? The best test of competence is performance on the job, rather than by examinations for which people can cram and which, at any rate, tend to test only the capacity to do things the way they have always been done—reinforcing an unsatisfactory status quo.

According to the conventional (and conservative) wisdom, the goal of the new wave of competency tests is to return to "the good old days." It is a questionable goal. David Riesman, in an essay in the recent volume, *Competency*, argues that Americans as a people have never really been all that competent. He goes back to the early days when ship building was the major industry of seafaring and mercantile nations. American ships, he says, had a reputation for not being well con-

structed. The reason, he adds, was that Americans believed, with much justification, that ship building techniques were subject to quick and substantial changes, and therefore it hardly paid to produce vessels intended to last.

This may well have been the beginning of the idea of built-in obsolescence; of producing for the moment; of counting on and supporting rapid change; of expecting tomorrow to be different and better than today, calling for different tools and instruments and vehicles and schools. If progress meant reliance on disposable goods, only fools would build things to last. In the old world, skilled craftsmen handed on their competence, and pride in it, to their children; in the new world, children were expected to strike out in new directions, to overshadow their parents' success and achievements.

Why then place such emphasis on competency now? The answer is that the American position in the world has changed drastically and must be expected to change even more. Reliance on unlimited resources clearly is no longer justified. Reliance on unchallenged technological leadership today is quite evidently foolhardy. This puts the education and training of Americans in a different light. It means new demands on the schools, but demands that cannot be met any more by a "return" to the past. It is against this national, economic, and sociological background that public education needs to be reviewed as the schools move through the 1980s and beyond.

Support for Education Declining

Support for education has seriously declined. When urban budgets are under pressure, the schools take the brunt of the cutbacks. When New York City was on the brink of bankruptcy a few years ago, President Ford went on national television to assure the public that, in the event of default, all "essential services" would be kept going by the federal government. The essential services were fire and police protection, garbage collection, and hospitals—not schools. In a number of cities, particularly in Ohio but also in other states, schools were actually shut down repeatedly for lack of funds; children were sent home; educational services were discontinued for weeks, even months. Yet, there was no outcry.

There are a variety of reasons for these phenomena. As the population ages, support for the schools declines, even in the once education-minded affluent suburbs. After World War II when the baby boom was at its height, young couples with large and growing families moved into the suburbs largely in search of the kind of schools they wanted for their children. They viewed school taxes as a personal investment. They were, after all, paying for the education of their own children. Compared with the high cost of private schools, they knew they were getting a bargain.

By now those suburbs have aged. The children have grown up. Many of the older people, who no longer have children in school, live on fixed incomes. Their own grandchildren usually attend schools in faraway places. The elderly are no longer eager to support expenditures for other people's children. In an era that has made the "self" a dominant concept, it is hardly surprising that hard-pressed, inflation-harassed older people, too, are thinking of themselves first. Schools are not high on their list of priorities.

There are other reasons for the decline of public support for the schools. Perhaps the potential of universal public schooling has been oversold; perhaps the schools have failed to live up to their part of the bargain. The fact is that many expectations have been shattered. When Horace Mann envisioned free and universal education, it never occurred to him that anything more would be needed than to open the doors wide and the school would automatically become the "balance wheel" of society. He could not fathom the day when schools would worry about absenteeism or dropouts. He could not have reconciled his dream with the need to motivate young people to avail themselves of the opportunity to learn. He would not have thought it possible that once education had become universally available, functional illiteracy would persist.

Yet, the reality today is precisely that universal education has not given the U.S. a sufficiently well-educated population. This is not to say that the schools have failed to deliver a good deal of what has been expected of them. Comparative international studies, for example, have shown that the American public schools have made a substantial contribution to the goal of an upwardly mobile society. These studies

prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that, in the U.S., a far greater proportion of the children of the poor rise to the top level of academic achievement, and therefore to eventual economic success, than in any other industrial nation. The aging cab driver who glories in his son's graduation from a first-rate engineering college; the waiter whose children have joined the elite professions of law and medicine; the sharecropper's son who presides over the public education establishment of a large state—all of these are real-life success stories, far from isolated or exceptional. They could not have come true without the concept and the reality of the public schools.

But if many have succeeded, too many continue to fail; and the failures are concentrated in the nation's big cities where the sickness of the environment contributes to the failure in the first place. At a time when the American people are desperately looking for solutions, and for scapegoats when solutions elude them, confidence in the schools wanes. There is an outcry for a return to . . . what? The old virtues. The Three Rs. Respect for the "good old days."

There is fear, uncertainty, and a sense of loss among the American people. Yet, the majority of Americans are actually very comfortable. They own much. Their standard of living has risen steadily for years. And being comfortable, they do not like to risk change, unless it means going "back" to something that in the haze of nostalgia seems the key to the promised land. They want to keep what they have. They want to conserve. They want the schools to be better and cheaper as, these dreamers believe, they once used to be.

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Making Less Be Better

The question of how public education will respond to its present condition and to the demands placed on the schools can be answered only with another question: How will the U.S. respond? Education never responds separately or differently from the society it serves. It was no accident that the American schools made their greatest effort on behalf of the poor and the disadvantaged in the mid-1960s when the country, in grief and shock over the assassination of John F. Kennedy, took up the promise of Lyndon Johnson that "We shall overcome." It was in response to that national mood that the schools created a host of special "compensatory" programs aimed at helping the children of the slums and the ghettos to attain equality of opportunity through education. It was then that research and action concentrated as never before on the question of how children could be helped to rise above a crippling environment. The creation of Project Head Start was more than just another educational experiment; it was a symbol of education's response to the nation's spirit.

Educational Agenda for the 1980s

And so, granted that education's response will depend on the nation's mood and priorities, let me try to separate out the needs to which the schools must address themselves.

Without any question, there is the need to make less be better. This is a traumatic demand; responding to it will be a difficult, disconcerting experience. Given a tradition of growth that almost amounts to an ideology, it is difficult to face the new conditions—of fewer young people, a slowing economy, and limited resources. Painful as it may be to face that reality, there is an alternative to expansion: a return to qual-

ity as the key ingredient of planning for the future. In education, this means organizing anew for the teaching of the basic skills.

The first task therefore must obviously be the redefining of what is basic. The basic skills must, of course, include the Three Rs; and it is evident that they need to be taught more effectively. One of the rock bottom demands for the future is indeed the assurance that all children will be taught to read and write in the early grades. I believe that this can be accomplished. The details concerning how the schools might respond will be discussed later.

The popular demand for a "return to the basics," meaning the Three Rs, is misleading. Those who call for it loudest appear to be more interested in cheap rather than improved education. They are opposed to "frills"; but one suspects that they are thinking of a stripped-down schooling primarily for the "masses," while their own children would continue to benefit from all the extras through private schools or through privately financed, after-school activities. Neither music nor the other arts are frills. For any program of basic education, they remain indispensable. So does an understanding of the past—the American past, of course, but also the past of humanity in more general, global terms.

Are the Constitution and the Bill of Rights less basic than the multiplication tables? Is the capacity to read more fundamental than an understanding of the importance of the right to read without curbs of censorship? To know the meaning of freedom calls for something more than the old line, "This is a free country, isn't it?" that is usually invoked by someone who is about to do something illegal or antisocial.

Equality of opportunity and non-discriminatory life in a democracy, as American history has so painfully shown, are things that need to be learned. The basic skills surely should include an appreciation of and a devotion to: a society under law; human rights; an understanding of human behavior; a knowledge of economics as well as logic and philosophy; and perhaps most of all, the relationship between democracy and personal ethics.

Some time ago, the front page of *The Wall Street Journal* carried an article with the headline "Bye Bye Basics." I expected an education story, but it turned out that the story dealt with home construction. It

seems that, in order to counteract the resistance to inflationary costs of purchasing a home, enterprising builders were offering a "basic home," a simple house stripped of extras and frills. According to the story, the new home instantly ran into buyer resistance, despite its attractive price. One potential customer who had looked at, and rejected, the basic home explained his negative reaction by saying that he did not want to live in "a box." At that point, the article suddenly seemed to turn into an education story after all; students, also, do not want to live in a basic box stripped of all the exciting extras that go into good education.

There is no way of making less be better without addressing the question of how to educate and deploy teachers. My earlier claim that all children can be taught to read and write, without postponement and without reliance on remediation later on, depends on the availability of teachers carefully educated to do the job. Yet, over the years, elementary school teachers have chronically complained that their education simply failed to prepare them for this crucial and difficult task. They were given a great deal of theory about such instruction but far too little actual experience. If their preparation for real-life classroom work were to be applied to the education of physicians, new doctors would face their first patients alone in their offices on the day they are licensed to practice medicine.

If elementary school teachers are to be prepared for success in teaching the basic skills, then much of their professional education should be moved out of the college campuses and into classrooms with real children. The demand to make less become better calls for a revival of the 1960s recommendations by the late James B. Conant who urged the introduction of clinical training, internships, and residencies as a means of getting a new generation of teachers ready to transmit the basic skills to all children.

At the same time, we should rethink the deployment of these teachers. The early grades need to be staffed by far greater numbers of adults—teachers, volunteers, paraprofessionals, and bright, older students—so that children will learn the basic skills in small groups, with constant checking on the mastery of each skill before new skills are learned. Once again, it should be stressed that prevention of failure

must replace delayed detection and remediation. Nothing is more destructive to self-esteem than to push children from grade to grade without first insuring that they have the tools to face new opportunities to learn and expand their horizons. To send non-readers into junior and senior high school is to condemn them to spend their days imprisoned in an environment that destroys their self-confidence. It turns education into torture that makes dropping out a sensible response.

It seems absurd that good private schools, whose students are so carefully selected that they would probably learn the basic skills under almost any condition, teach their children to read in small groups of seven or eight youngsters, while many public schools still try to accomplish the same task with one teacher for anywhere from 28 to 40 youngsters. It may sound utopian to suggest a drastic reduction in class size at a time when the pressure is for cutting staffs and saving money; but the suggestion need not be fiscally unrealistic, provided such increases in staffing at the early grades are offset by greater economies in other situations where large-group instruction or independent study, reinforced by new technology (television, tapes, videodiscs, computers, etc.) make this possible without sacrifice of quality.

Crucial to recapturing a sense of quality in our schools is a return to a common core of shared intellectual experiences. Even many of the brightest young people today leave public school, and later college and professional study, without any common intellectual ground.

A new sharing must begin with attention to language. Moreover, the language to be shared by all is English. (More about foreign languages later.) The quality of our culture is instantly betrayed by the decline of its language, and today the American language is in trouble. It is misused; it is abused; it is fragmented into an infinite variety of jargons. Instead of conveying meaning, it is often deliberately employed to hide meaning. When government agencies outlaw the use of the word "poverty" and replace it with "low-income," the purpose is to deceive people into believing that poverty has been conquered. When a conference on world hunger refers to starving countries as "nutritionally imbalanced," the language is used to cover up rather than to expose. When politicians use the terms "appropriate" and "inappro-

priate" in place of "right" and "wrong," they deliberately fudge questions of ethics.

Asked by a school administrator to offer advice on the improvement of English instruction in the schools, Walter Lippmann once wrote:

> Experience that can't be described and communicated in words cannot long be vividly remembered. When you looked at the stars once and remarked that they are grand, and then again only in order to say that the heavens are swell, why not look at the Wrigley chewing gum sign on Broadway which is equally grand and swell? Without words to give precision to ideas the ideas themselves soon become indistinguishable.

There is an intimate connection between the use of the langage and the quality of life. When the language is dehumanized, those who use it lose contact with humanity. The inanities of urban schools, parodied in Bel Kaufman's classic book, *Up the Down Staircase*, had their origin in the absurd and bureaucratic memoranda emanating from the principal's office. The spirit of cold uncaring that pervades so many big organizations, governmental as well as private, begins with similar communications from the internal seats of power. The pre-written and thoughtlessly mouthed scenarios imposed on airline flight attendants make a mockery of the purpose of language. Speeches artificially concocted for our politicians and leaders are instruments of image building rather than of communication.

Instead of being used to explain and enlighten, words are used to cover up and befog. There is a direct link between language and ethics; and when the schools teach their students to read and write, they should at the same time teach the connection between words and action. From the *Scarlet Letter* and *Huckleberry Finn* to *All the President's Men*, literature should be viewed as the entry to personal value judgments.

And so, we return to the search for a shared core through the school, the only institution that touches the lives of the majority of Americans. In recent decades there has been a turning away from the school's task to unify—to implement the motto, *E Pluribus Unum*. In an understandable reaction to a frequently jingoistic and occasionally coercive approach to Americanization and standardization, educators and politicians have recently shied away from ideas that bind people together.

Reliance on the melting pot was replaced by the celebration of ethnicity.

Understandable, of course. Pride in one's roots is a key to self-esteem. But isolation into a new tribalism is hardly progress. Isolationism is as questionable a theory when applied to individuals or groups of individuals within a nation as it is in the relationship with other countries. To turn away from an understanding of, and loyalty to, a common national heritage is pluralism-run-riot. Fragmentation into vocational, professional, and other special interest blocks destroys the sense of community that must hold even a pluralistic nation together.

It is no coincidence that the colleges, having moved in the 1960s to a "Do your own thing" elective system, are desperately looking for new ways to rescue the idea of general education. When Harvard and other institutions talk about reinstating a core curriculum, they are searching for a common core that binds the college community together and that will eventually strengthen the intellectual ties between educated Americans.

It is easier to proclaim a goal than to create educational programs to attain it. Calling for an intellectual cement to bind a people together is easier than creating the proper mixture in the classroom. And yet, it should not be impossible to agree on some basic common knowledge of American history and literature; the meaning of liberty, justice, and individual rights; familiarity with the fundamentals of economics; an understanding of science and technology; an appreciation of the arts; a comprehension of this country's place in the world.

There is no need to reinvent the wheel. Examples of past programs abound. In the late 1940s, one of the most successful ones was launched by Amherst College. Known as "Problems of American Democracy," it involved all the undergraduates and faculty members. Some 13 problems were tackled each year. The faculty wrote the instant textbooks, based on source materials. Scientists and humanists joined in the study of issues that affected them all. One of the program's originators was asked what he thought was its purpose. "To teach students to consider the consequences of their actions," he said.

The goal of providing young people with some such common ground cannot be put off until college, without running the risk that

substantial numbers—at least half of each new generation—would not be affected by it. The place to begin, especially in view of the even greater specialization and fragmentation of professional life in the decades ahead, is in elementary and secondary school.

Even as the schools seek to recreate a sense of common purpose, they must help young Americans make new connections with the world beyond the U.S. There is no longer any excuse for what Representative Paul Simon has called "the tongue-tied Americans." Nor is there any excuse for the schools to treat foreign languages in a way that made the late Heywood Broun say that, when in high school, he had studied "beginner's French," but on arriving in Paris for the first time, he discovered that nobody there spoke "beginner's French."

The myth that, for some physiological reason, Americans are incapable of mastering foreign languages, is readily exploded whenever Americans find the need to function in a foreign surrounding. Unfortunately, the need is too rarely acknowledged. In the afterglow of victory in World War II, some exuberant publicists hailed the beginning of The American Century. The U.S. would be the dominant power and therefore English would be the only language needed for international discourse. By now, conditions have drastically changed. Although the U.S. remains enormously influential, no single nation any longer dominates world affairs. To prosper and earn respect and confidence abroad, Americans must compete—in world commerce, in diplomacy, and, most important, in ideas.

That means Americans must be able to communicate. They must learn to speak the languages of people with whom they deal; they must understand their customs and traditions. When the President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies surveyed the scene, it concluded that the lack of knowledge in those fields constitutes a threat to the nation's security. The commission cited the dangers faced by American diplomatic representatives in hostile situations, made more menacing when under siege, who are incapable of addressing their opponents face to face. It recalled the fact that, at the time of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam and Cambodia, there were virtually no Americans whose expertise in those areas could guide the policy-

makers. Resulting misunderstanding and errors ultimately led to the costly and tragic war.

Today, the commission reported, there are more than 10,000 Japanese sales representatives working the the U.S., and all of them are fluent in English; on the other side, there are about 900 American sales representatives in Japan, and hardly any of them speak Japanese. Thus, the challenge to the schools is real and urgent: to reintroduce some sensible foreign language requirements, at least for academically able students; to encourage them to study one language for three or more years in order to get the full benefit of the necessary reading and speaking skills; and to train and retain a sufficient number of teachers to enable them to transmit the basic skill of the spoken word. In addition, the schools today have available a host of technological teaching aids, from foreign language films and television shows to sophisticated videodiscs and computer technology.

Beyond the study of languages, young people should be introduced to the historic background and modern realities of world affairs. There is cause for concern when, as a recent survey showed, a substantial percentage of high school students tested thought that Golda Meir was the president of Egypt.

No modern education program can afford to overlook the power of communications with their instant replay of everything that takes place anywhere in the world. No protest is too remote not to be seen (although not necessarily understood) by millions. While we view with pride that new capacity to inform, to provide information, and to expose wrong-doing, these new capacities also bring with them enormous power to agitate and to obstruct.

Communications spread like wildfire, setting emotions ablaze; but today's message is readily drowned out by tomorrow's new events. Some of us recall that almost forgotten name, Mario Savio, leader of the 1964 rebellion at Berkeley, who threatened to bring the university to "a grinding halt." He did. He could not have done so without the communications technology that insured the instant replay of his action and words throughout the U.S. and the world. Ripples from Berkeley spread to unleash similar, though often more violent, action in Paris and West Germany. However, even though Mr. Savio's face had been

on front pages from coast to coast and his name a household word far beyond the groves of academe, a decade later, when he was registering for advanced science studies at Berkeley, Mr. Savio's name brought no spark of recognition from the young woman registrar.

On a more serious level, today's young people often have only the haziest knowledge of traumatic American experiences that aroused the deepest emotions in their parents or even their older brothers and sisters. World War II is only a blur; Korea a mystery; Vietnam rapidly fading from view. How many of today's college students, as they look at their country's part in world affairs, remember the facts and the meaning of the Marshall Plan? All of this threatens to leave each generation floundering without an intellectual lifeline to even the recent past, as new information is piled on top of . . . what? Yesterday's forgotten story.

The need in the 1980s is to use communications more rationally—to bring about effective action for thoughtful reforms, to move forward, to understand, not only image and posture, but substance and meaning. This calls for a new kind of teaching. What is taught in school should allow young people to look beneath the surface and probe for the heart underneath the veneer. It calls for analysis and synthesis.

Not long ago, the Club of Rome, turning away from its earlier concerns with the world economy, analyzed the way in which human beings have been learning for centuries (*No Limits to Learning*, 1979). It defined, and then called obsolete, a process dominated by two factors: The maintenance of culture, which will always remain an important part of teaching the young, and the occasional attempt to move forward, to reform, to change. The forward surge, the study said, has always been brought about by shock. It was an emergency reaction, often panicky in nature (as in the American reaction to the launching of the first space satellite, Sputnik, by the Soviet Union in 1957). It was rarely, if ever, a planned, premeditated step into the future. What is needed now, the Club of Rome said, is an anticipatory approach to educational change based on what ought to be and what might be expected to happen.

While the schools should plan for change, they should not be dazzled by the prospect of dramatic change. The tools will be different and

should be used to best advantage; but what needs to be accomplished will not be fundamentally different. The drama of the quantum jump of change may already be behind us—the invention of aviation, the taming or unleashing of the atom, the conquest of space, the miracle of television and of computer technology. The challenge now is to use the new tools better, more thoughtfully, more constructively in the service of mankind. Our record on that score is dismal. The human side of the equation has not kept up with the pace of man's awesome technological capacity. Some of the questions to be asked are as simple as: Will the videodisc provide primarily cheap home pornography? If used in school, will it merely put the same old textbook lessons more attractively on the screen? What will we do with the new magic?

The challenge, to repeat my initial thesis, is to use the tools to make less be better. In a society that depends for its economic and personal welfare very largely on service, the schools need to teach ways of improving the delivery of service. In addition to teaching skills, they must teach the importance of attitudes—toward the job, the public, and the community. Reliability is at least as crucial as competence. Releasing the mental processes for innovation and being ready to take calculated risks is a prerequisite for more effective management and more compelling leadership in business, industry, and government. It is also essential for the improvement of education itself.

Education in the 1980s must make a special effort to bring about an end to preoccupation with self, the isolation of institutions, and the inward-looking, self-absorption of special interest groups and single-issue advocates. Education must fight against the isolation, first, of those who are successful in improving the human condition and, second, isolation between nations, national groups, and ethnic enclaves. One of the major tasks in the years ahead will be to create links between islands of excellence. Part of education's role in creating a sense of shared goals and common experience is to close gaps, reduce antagonisms, eliminate divisions.

In a narrower sense, education itself must build bridges between its own islands of excellence. Progress in American education has always depended, in the absence of any central ministry or other education authority, on small enclaves of experimentation and success. Although

much of the news about education is bad, many good things do happen—often in obscurity. Many a successful program in one school is unknown to teachers in a school only a few blocks away. Substantial funds are spent by foundations to underwrite innovative approaches. Even if they work, the world, including the world of education, often knows nothing about them.

In the absence of communication between those islands of progress, the waves of conservatism eventually wash over them, wipe them out. This is particularly true when progress results from controversial departures from the status quo, and only the objections of a suspicious "establishment" are heard. If education is to struggle out of its identity crisis, it must make deliberate efforts to identify its own success stories and help spread their message; if the schools are to emerge from under the cloud of public distrust and dissatisfaction, they must persuade their potential supporters that there is evidence that less can be made to be better.

Education must help American society to move from litigation to mutual trust. There was need for litigation as a means of putting an end to discrimination, injustice, and deception. Those who speak out against litigation and government regulation as if it were a plot against their own rights, overlook the past wrongs that needed so desperately to be set right. It is a mark of progress that it has only recently become feasible for individuals to sue institutions that used to stand fortresslike and untouchable. But no community or nation can live in a permanent state of litigation or fear of it. Under such conditions, institutions and professions become overly defensive, inefficient, and costly. Only lawyers and insurance companies stand to gain from such an adversarial state of affairs.

Education can show the way back to an atmosphere of mutual confidence in which many disagreements can be resolved without litigation. The focus then is on how to rebuild trust in education, both for its own sake and as a model of rebuilding trust in American institutions. The schools must earn such trust. They must earn it by showing that even in a period of retrenchment, quality can triumph. They can do it by addressing themselves, as suggested above, to the teaching of the basic skills and to the broad redefining of what is basic.

The schools, however, must teach why public education is fundamental. Year after year, thousands of high schools graduate millions of youths. Yet, in all the 12 years of schooling, few, if any, are ever instructed in the relationship between public education and this particular society. American historians ignore that question in their account of this nation's past. They touch on education only incidentally, as in the "separate but equal" doctrine upheld by the Supreme Court in *Plessy V. Ferguson*, a case that ironically did not even deal with education but with railways. They briefly glance at education again when they record the passage of the Land-grant Act in 1862. They return to it with the *Brown* decision of the Supreme Court in 1954 that overturned *Plessy* and outlawed school desegregation.

Nowhere in the teaching of American history is attention paid to Jefferson's deep concern with the need for public education. Who teaches young Americans about Jefferson's blueprint for a school system that would have been a first step toward his ideal of creating an aristocracy of talent rather than of inherited wealth and privilege? How many Americans are ever told about the plans forged by Horace Mann, based on his conviction that democracy would not endure without universal public education? Yet, the link between the public schools and the open, upwardly mobile society may well be closer than any other institution's link with democracy.

Restoring Confidence in Public Education

As early as 1820, the opponents of public education took their stand. *The National Gazette*, a long since defunct newspaper then published in Philadelphia, attacked the concept of taxation to finance public education. Many of its arguments have remained just as much part of the American education debate as Jefferson's appeal to idealism. Those among the "mechanical and working classes" who have already been successful, the newspaper warned, would consider an education tax "evil," since they would be made to feel that they "had toiled for the benefit of other families than their own." Since "one of the chief excitements to industry" is the hope of earning the means to educate one's children, the editorial continued, to provide state-financed schools would destroy all incentive and place a premium on idleness. "We have no confidence in any compulsory equalizations," said the *Gazette*. "It has well been observed that they pull down what is above, but never raise what is below. . . ."

We know today from observation through American history that the newspaper was wrong, that public education was in fact the ladder that made it possible for millions to raise themselves from "below," to move up in the American economy and in society. Yet these powers of public education are being questioned. Public education is under siege by forces that question its cost and its capacity. The defenders of the

public schools are uncertain of their own task and strength; they are deeply affected by the identity crisis that has sapped the enterprise itself.

As a result, public education today faces unprecedented dangers. When the public schools are stripped down to their "basics," those who can afford it (often the same people who vote for the stripping down) buy the extras for their own children in after-school activities or by sending them to private schools. When California, in the aftermath of Proposition 13, eliminated summer school programs throughout the state, affluent communities rented the school buildings and hired teachers with private funds in order to insure their own children's summer programs. When budget problems in Ohio led to a rash of school closings in mid-year, once again the well-to-do were able to provide substitute facilities and personnel to prevent their own children from being penalized. In all these instances, to return to the 1820 terminology, only the education of "the other people's children" suffered. Those other children were, of course, the poor and the deprived, those most in need of schooling who suffered most by being denied an equal chance.

The Threat of Educational Vouchers

It is in part because many Americans are dissatisfied with the public schools that they are looking for solutions outside the public sector. Part of the public dissatisfaction—a substantial part—is caused by the public schools' excessive rigidity. They have rarely (except in some highly favored suburbs) lived up to their own ideal of the right education for every child. In too many instances the public schools provide the same education for all students, and in doing so lower their standards to the lowest common denominator. Although highly decentralized, it is nevertheless a "system," often obsessed with doing things systematically. In a tradition that goes back to the turn of the century, when the railroads and the factories were the models for all American institutions, the schools remain too standardized, too reluctant to accommodate brilliance and unconventional ideas, both among its teachers and its students.

Politicians are picking up these sentiments of dissatisfaction and

translating them into such policies as tuition tax credits and school vouchers. The voucher system would give all parents the equivalent of a fixed amount of money to take their children to the school of their choice (provided that school had the space and otherwise agreed to admit their children). Yet, tax credits to help parents to finance their children's education in non-public schools, at a cost to the federal treasury of billions of dollars, would further weaken the public education system, thus speeding the middle-class exodus from its classrooms.

Liberal theoreticians who designed the voucher system built into their proposals a variety of administrative safeguards to prevent circumventing integration. Nevertheless, such safeguards (which at any rate would require a large and costly supervision and enforcement apparatus) are likely to go by the boards in a conservative era. If those trends go unopposed, the U.S. may ultimately be left with two educational strata rigidly divided along the lines of class and wealth—and probably race as well. At the end of that road is the graveyard of the American dream; for without public education as the "balance wheel" there is little hope of preserving an open society. But philosophical opposition alone is not an adequate answer. The public schools cannot be saved without a determined effort on their part to satisfy the public and gain back the support of the disillusioned by providing an education that, to return to the theme of this fastback, makes less become better.

In the past when the public schools have succeeded, it has been on such islands of excellence where rules and lesson plans could be suspended, where public schools, in fact, followed the path of the best and most imaginative private ones. (I want to stress that I consider the existence of the private education sector and its continued support, though not with public funds, essential to the quality of American education and to the principle of autonomy and choice—a principle that could be jeopardized if the private schools were to become publicly financed and regulated.)

The best defense the public schools can wage against the threat of a voucher system is to provide the kinds of choices within the system that the proponents of vouchers claim their scheme would offer. There is no reason why the public schools cannot create their own elite schools as

they have in such institutions as the Boston Latin School, the Bronx High School of Science or New Trier High School, to name just a few that admit students on the basis of academic merit; language, science, or arts-oriented schools—as they have in some instances with "magnet" schools; also schools based on progressive or traditional models. Such schools now exist as isolated islands of excellence and are largely overlooked. In order to reply to those who demand greater choice, variety must become part of the system everywhere. This calls for a high level of imagination and creativity.

Needed: Leadership and Confidence

Ultimately, the years ahead require two basic ingredients if there is to be a renaissance of public education: leadership and confidence. Action with the consent of the governed is possible only through trust of the governed in the governors.

The schools must be efficiently administered. The wheels must be kept turning, and administering a large enterprise requires skill and tenacity. But mere administration is not enough, not even when it is competent. There is a need for men and women who lead. At a time when the pledge of allegiance to the bottom line seems to dominate, a system that merely tries to withstand a siege cannot prevail.

It will not be enough in the 1980s and beyond merely to react, even if the reaction is constructive, to this or that commission report or research study in an effort to make some patchwork repairs. It will not do, for example, simply to respond to the President's Commission of Foreign Language and International Studies by fitting in a language requirement here or a course on world understanding somewhere else. Or, after a study of the report by the Commission on the Humanities, to feel reassured when school boards nod and say, "Yes, the humanities *are* important. We must do a better job of teaching them. By the way, what *are* the humanities?" Or, in a panic after some new indication that children in the Soviet Union (not to mention Japan) are ahead of ours in mathematics and science, to try to find an extra hour for those subjects in the old curriculum.

There is a need for a cohesive look at what the sum total of 12 years of education ought to be—not with the intent of creating a standardized

curriculum or a straitjacket to be put on every classroom but in the hope of drawing an intellectual roadmap. The schools have often given their response under momentary pressures—on drugs, on sex, on driving automobiles, or dabbling in questions of careers. The shelves and computers are filled to overflowing with reports and recommendations on an infinite variety of problems and questions. Education has been taken apart and studied under the microscope; it now needs to be viewed once again as a cohesive whole whose sum must be made larger than its parts.

It is unreasonable to expect local school boards to be capable of devising a cohesive curriculum, even with the help of the schools' professional staff. To recreate a sense of direction and purpose calls for the thoughtful efforts of philosophers of education in partnership with practitioners. Such a process of synthesis is looking for an intellectual home and a national pulpit. Unless the universities and the schools of education can provide both, the congregation—the school boards, administrators, teachers—will continue to flounder. The identity crisis, then, could be public education's ultimate undoing. That would be a tragedy, not just for public education but for the still young experiment in popular democracy. America's frontiers have closed one by one; first the land and then the expectation of limitless resources. Only education remains as our potentially limitless, though invisible, frontier.

Theories about the failure of the public schools are seductive. They gain support because they single out some real weaknesses which, at a particular moment, are of serious and justified concern. Public school educators have been guilty of some of the follies of which they have been accused. They have espoused theories that failed to teach; condoned policies of exclusion and neglect that, by shutting out large groups of children, violated public education's own principles. At other times, they have—reflecting public attitudes—embraced vapid academic standards that temporarily jeopardized the nation's intellectual stamina.

But the major strands of public education's fabric have stood the test of time remarkably well. Faith in education remains a unifying force. It is as strong in today's urban ghettos as it was among a different

population of similar ghettos throughout this country's history. It is a faith that even slavery could not erase.

The 1980s call for a new pride—a readiness to march forward. Instead of plea-bargaining with the snipers, American education must show what it can do, using new tools to rebuild lasting values. At the foundation, the true bottom line is the promise of opportunity for every child—rich or poor, black or white—to move up and ahead, judged only by ability and willingness to strive.